

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

28 January 1980

MEMORANDUMSoviet and Sudanese Efforts to Negotiate  
an Eritrean Settlement

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*During the past three years, both the Soviet Union and Sudan have failed in their attempts to mediate the Eritrean conflict. The main problem has been the consistent refusal of the Ethiopians and Eritreans to compromise. Both countries, however, are continuing their efforts to get the two sides together.*

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The failure of the Ethiopian Government offensive last July to capture Nacfa and the recent Eritrean success in pushing the Ethiopians out of forward positions in northern Eritrea have prompted Moscow to renew its efforts to achieve a political settlement of the conflict. The Soviets probably have long realized that a military solution is unobtainable in Eritrea, but their three-year effort to broker a compromise between Addis Ababa and the Eritrean groups, particularly the Marxist Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), has been unavailing. Each time Moscow has managed to get representatives of both sides together, the ruling council's determination to pursue a punitive approach and the Eritreans' demand for independence have precipitated a breakdown of the talks. Even Soviet attempts to capitalize on the apparent ideological affinity between the Ethiopian Government and the EPLF have come to naught.

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Moscow's latest attempt reportedly [redacted] encouraging the Ethiopian Government to negotiate;

[redacted] Despite approximately 20,000 government casualties in Eritrea over the past year, Mengistu and the majority of the ruling council's Standing Committee remain determined to force the Eritreans to accept the government's offer of limited autonomy and are unhappy with the Soviets' unilateral mediation efforts. Moscow's efforts will probably continue, especially as the cost of the government effort in Eritrea mounts. There is little chance, however, that either the government or the Eritreans will alter their positions soon. [redacted]

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Sudan also has been involved in long, frustrating, and unsuccessful efforts to arrange a political settlement in Eritrea. Sudan wants the conflict to end because of the tension it creates with Ethiopia and the economic burden of caring for approximately 250,000 Eritrean refugees. The Sudanese also are concerned that Ethiopia will use its contacts with southern Sudanese dissidents to create problems for Khartoum. Sudan cannot abandon the Eritreans without offending its Islamic coreligionists. For years, Sudan has provided sanctuary for the guerrillas and served as a conduit for Arab and other arms destined for the Eritreans. To some extent this has hampered its efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement to the Eritrean problem; on the other hand, Khartoum's close ties with the Eritreans have allowed it to assume a key role in attempting to bring about talks between the two sides. [redacted]

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Since the failure of the Numayri-Mengistu talks in Freetown last February, when Mengistu rejected Sudanese good offices, Khartoum has been reluctant to act as a mediator unless there is a good chance of success. Sudanese President Numayri has been repeatedly frustrated by Addis Ababa's obduracy and by the failure of the three Eritrean rebel groups to unite around a common negotiating position. This appears to have dampened Sudanese willingness to sponsor negotiations, although Khartoum is continuing its efforts to get both sides talking. [redacted]

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